

MAKING A PLACE: WOMEN IN
THE 'WORKERS' CITY'

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with a description of Elizabeth, an outer suburb of Adelaide, as a 'workers' city', this paper asserts the central importance of women's activities, whether in households or wider territories, in the making, defining and defending of place. Against the notion that Elizabeth and places like it were 'working man's towns', the paper argues that while men's capabilities as workers and breadwinners were important, it was women within working-class households who performed the more difficult tasks of translating male wages (and their own earnings) into valuable outcomes. In this sense, women organised the successful use of the resources provided by a planned community and the relative prosperity of the post-war long boom. Women also managed the 'outside' of the home, its links with the public sphere and with external authorities ranging from credit providers to welfare and tenancy officers as well as its articulation to largely female-maintained neighbourhood and kin coalitions. Accordingly, Elizabeth relied very much on the vigilance and capacity of women. Finally, the paper suggests that the important role now played by women activists in Elizabeth and other working-class suburbs which suffered recession and economic decline since the 1970s is neither simply a product of poverty nor a dramatically new feature of working-class life, but an extension of that established responsibility for local standards and local security, in the context of increased opportunities for participation and for the creation of women's institutions and initiatives. There are clear implications in this for any attempt to understand, consult or intervene in working-class communities.

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MAKING A PLACE: WOMEN IN THE 'WORKERS' CITY'

Mark Peel

Australia's post-war suburbs are fixed in a bland imaginative space somewhere beyond the 'real' city. Neither tales of a people 'lost' in suburban mediocrity, nor the nostalgias of baby-boomer childhood, tell of how the saga of mass suburbanisation was also the story of continuing inequality. As the market city flexed and grew during the post-war long boom, it reproduced the inequalities that had shaped the straggletowns of a different era. The boom certainly generated a new degree of affluence, stemming mostly from overtime, second jobs, work for women and the young, the capacity to organise or the luck of a good union, the ability to save, to buy, to plan ahead, even to secure credit. Yet most people did not change their class location, though some of their children would. The boom simply meant that most did a little better out of being working class. With the end of the boom came a new hard times, when their continuing occupation of working-class jobs and working-class territories would make them vulnerable all over again.

What ordinary people built during this brief period of prosperity was a series of workers' cities in Australia's outer suburbs. In many ways, these places were a far more successful fulfilment of working-class goals than the supposedly 'richer' communities, both inner suburban and European, they had left behind. Places like Dandenong, Broadmeadows and Liverpool were the territories of skilled tradesmen and factory workers, low-paid clerks and shop workers, British migrants and 'new Australians', working-class homebuyers and public housing tenants. The place I write of here — Elizabeth in South Australia — was a particularly rich site for the creation of a workers' city. Better serviced and better planned than most fringe suburbs, it also benefited throughout the 1960s from the attentions of activist public officials in the South Australian Housing Trust. With its new houses, accessible shops, and buoyant labour markets, it provided its people

— largely British migrants — with decent and useful spaces and the means to make them work.¹

Elizabeth was also a model town, designed according to the neutral truths of planning expertise. As in the British new towns they copied, planners incorporated the principles of ‘social balance’ and ‘social mix’ precisely to prevent working-class social practices dominating the landscape. In effect, this meant attempting to attract sufficient middle-class ‘leaders’ to carry their less able neighbours onto the sunny uplands of bourgeois community. The fact that their first imperatives were to establish a clear physical and social distance from renters and workers and to bemoan their haplessness in the face of unruly Poms and rampant shop stewards rendered such outcomes rather moot. Ironically, the ‘natural’ inclinations of middle class pioneers tended to confirm, not prevent, the imaginative and physical organisation of Elizabeth as a working-class territory.²

Claiming these outer suburbs as workers' cities seems uncontroversial enough, but less so, perhaps, is the main contention of this paper: that women, more than men, put these territories together and held them in place. Elizabeth is sometimes called a ‘working man's town’ or a ‘blue collar ghetto’. Both are distortions. Women established and maintained Elizabeth as a valued working-class territory and confirmed this as a place where the goals and projects of ordinary people could work, if for so short a time. Women’s work and competence made all the difference in the successful deployment of prosperity. And now, as these territories suffer the consequences of their histories under ‘restructuring’ and

¹ Throughout the 1960s, about half of Elizabeth's residents were British migrants, mostly from Lancashire, Birmingham, North London and Glasgow. Including their Australian-born children, British Elizabeth constituted 60 to 70 per cent of the population, with the proportion reaching 80 per cent or more in certain areas. In 1966, Elizabeth — not Richmond or Carlton or Leichhardt — was the single most concentrated immigrant settlement in Australia. See I.H. Burnley, ‘Social Ecology of Immigrant Settlement in Australian Cities’, in I.H. Burnley (ed.), *Urbanisation in Australia: The Post-War Experience*, Cambridge 1974, pp. 165-83.

² On new town planning and its assumptions about working-class spatial and social behaviour see Mark Peel, *Planning the Good City in Australia: Elizabeth as a New Town*, Urban Research Program, Australian National University, Working Paper No. 30, 1992.

‘rationalisation’, it is women who most often deal with these new constraints and try to define a future for the places they laboured so hard to make.

* * *

Seeing and hearing these workers’ cities demands a more sensitive analytical framework than some national urge for the suburbs. It means seeing and hearing the creativity and the limits of ordinary people’s attempts to organise their worlds. Sociologists and social historians — mostly in Britain — occasionally turned their gaze onto post-war working-class suburbs, some to confirm their worst suspicions about the vacuousness of ordinary culture, others to celebrate the vitality of difference in the midst of want.³ These social surveys certainly featured women; whatever their expectations, observers found it hard to ignore the continual referencing of working-class mothers and wives by informants.⁴ In Australia, community studies were dominated by investigations of status and identity in small towns, while studies of working-class places typically focused on work, family and gender relations in isolated mining communities.⁵ Australian

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- 3 See especially Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, London 1957; Peter Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community: A Study of Dagenham after Forty Years*, London 1963. For a discussion of this and other approaches in community studies, see Stuart Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life, 1957-1964*, Basingstoke 1986, pp. 31-57; Chas Critcher, 'Sociology, Cultural Studies and the Post-War Working Class', in John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson (eds), *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, London 1979, pp. 13-40; Séan Damer, *From Moorepark to 'Wine Alley': The Rise and Fall of a Glasgow Housing Scheme*, Edinburgh 1989, pp. 2-13.
- 4 Ronald Frankenberg, 'In the Production of their Lives, Men (?) ... Sex and Gender in British Community Studies', in Diana Leonard Barker and Sheila Allan (eds), *Sexual Divisions and Society: Process and Change*, London 1976, pp. 25-51. Ellen Ross is one of the few to consistently address the contradictions and histories of 'matrifocal' working-class families: see 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 15, 1983, pp. 4-27.
- 5 R.A. Wild, *Australian Community Studies and Beyond*, Sydney 1981, pp. 98-178; Andrew W. Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structure in the Coalfields of NSW*, Sydney 1988; Claire Williams, *Open Cut: The Working Class in an Australian Mining Town*, Sydney 1981. See also Belinda Probert, 'Class, Patriarchy and Community Studies', *Labour History*, vol. 44, 1983, pp. 92-8. The most successful attempt to put together place, identity and the organisation of the self in an Australian working-class place remains Janet McCalman's *Struggletown: Portrait of an Australian Working-Class Community, 1900-1965*, 2nd ed., Melbourne 1989.

social historians have proved reluctant to follow the working class out into the suburbs, and sociologists were more interested in questions of policy than in thick descriptions of local life.⁶

The study of working-class localities has always turned on the question of continuity versus change. While some marvelled in persistent difference, others signalled the movement of working-class people into a privatised and consumerist world.⁷ Yet proponents of continuity or change tended equally to add complexity to the study of ordinary people without providing a way forward into secure generalisations. Writing about the working class was an exercise in hedging bets as much as staking explanatory claims. One way out was to address subjectivity and consciousness, tracing the twists and turns of cultural power and subcultural subversion. Even better were attempts to describe the tensions between resistance and domination in people's everyday experience of class and their everyday insights and penetrations of their 'place'. Working-class culture, in this approach, expresses those creative insights and the sporadic acts of resistance they inform.⁸ People organise a future, inventing, adapting and inhabiting worlds, all within the limits of what is possible and authentic. They make do, in an unequal world. And we all participate in the construction and

⁶ Lois Bryson and Faith Thompson, *An Australian Newtown: Life and Leadership in a Working-Class Suburb*, Melbourne 1972; T. Brennan, *New Community: Problems and Policies*, Sydney 1973.

⁷ David Lockwood, 'Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society', in Anthony Giddens and David Held (eds), *Classes, Power and Conflict: Classical and Contemporary Debates*, Berkeley 1982, pp. 359-72; John H. Goldthorpe, *et al.*, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, London 1969; Bernard Ineichen, 'Home Ownership and Manual Workers' Life-Styles', *Sociological Review*, vol. 20, 1972, pp. 391-412. Convergence theories are summarised and criticised in H.F. Moorhouse and C.W. Chamberlain, 'Lower-Class Attitudes to Property: Aspects of the Counter-Ideology', *Sociology*, vol. 8, 1974, pp. 387-405; John Agnew, 'Home Ownership and Identity in Capitalist Societies', in James S. Duncan (ed.), *Housing and Identity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, London 1981, pp. 60-97.

⁸ Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working-Class Kids Get Working-Class Jobs*, Aldershot 1977.

reproduction of ourselves and of others as men and women, us and them, in particular places at particular times.⁹

In these terms, Elizabeth was what a particular group of working-class women and men made of a specific moment of opportunity and constraint. It was what they brought to a place and what that place then made possible or impossible. So the story of Elizabeth is also about how people used and experienced the contingencies of a specific landscape, its housing and factories, its distance from and its nearness to. As a planned community, patterns of usage and access were carefully anticipated by designers, who built cues and structures into the town to guide residents into the proper forms of social behaviour. They also wrote gender into the landscape, most basically in their assumption of female domestic labour. Planners directed a use of the home and of neighbourhood facilities, even a traversing of the landscape, which divided men from women; men, in cars and at work, women, on foot and in the home, with maybe the occasional bus trip to the Town Centre. Women were expected to fulfil precise roles in the new town: as wives, mothers, consumers and neighbours, they would confirm the planners' templates for the good city at the same time as a well-designed landscape 'improved' their performance in all of those roles.¹⁰

Yet residents also brought their creativity and their expectations to the new town. Individual and collective projects came together in a series of interruptions to the design rules, which made Elizabeth a very different place to that envisaged by its planners. People didn't have to keep coal in the bath or rip out the cupboards to interfere with anticipated uses. They simply had to define and use provided spaces in their own ways. People lived in their kitchens and dusted their living rooms. Young people occupied and vandalised public space or 'liberated' trees from plantations. Gardens filled with sheds and cubbies and rabbit hutches while fences came down or grew higher. Residents demanded buses, petitioned for cheaper

⁹ Sallie Westwood, *All Day, Every Day: Factory and Family in the Making of Women's Lives*, London 1984, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ See especially Carolyn Allport, 'Women and Suburban Housing: Post-War Planning in Sydney, 1943-61', in Peter Williams (ed.), *Social Process and the City*, Sydney 1983, pp. 64-87; L. McDowell, 'Towards an Understanding of the Gender Division of Urban Space', *Environment and Planning D*, vol. 1, 1983, pp. 59-72; Sophie Watson, *Accommodating Inequality: Gender and Housing*, Sydney 1988, pp. 21-38.

trains and bypassed the neighbourhood shops they were supposed to use in favour of the flasher shops in the Town Centre. The civic hall saw more bingo and cheap lottery games than concerts or plays. Men set up backyard car repair businesses. Women worked and commuted. Kids played in the street, 'found' things on building sites and marauded along the railway track or the pipeline which girded the town on either side. The road up the hill face was perilous for ageing Holdens and Simcas, but scrounging brought rewards like 'free' wood from the national park. Constructive and destructive, sporadic and organised, all of these actions pulled Elizabeth further and further away from the clean lines and smooth surfaces of the expert planner.¹¹ Elizabeth could be a workers' city only because the Housing Trust provided the materials: cheap homes, rental housing, work, schools, shops. And it was a highly valued place, in part, because those materials were so much more generously provided in Elizabeth than in the places from which most residents came. But it could never be the city its planners intended because they did not use it, make it and live it; they did not develop its routines and practices and they did not realise its projects and sentiments.¹²

Elizabeth's people didn't choose the location or the fixed design of their place, nor did they control the organisation of factory sites and work structures, housing policies, transport access or the provision of welfare and social benefits. Elizabeth had its costs, especially isolation in a raw and often drab environment. For women who didn't work outside the home, and cut off from the opportunities that more settled environments might offer, that sense of isolation could be very keen. British migrants, in particular, found a fifteen or twenty mile trip into the centre of Adelaide a daunting prospect. Prosperity was also relative for most, and maintaining it still demanded a careful management of household resources, a bit of luck and good health. But most could find some of the things they were looking

¹¹ I rely here on Michel de Certeau's conceptualisation of spatial and social practice in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley 1984.

¹² A useful theorization along these lines is Paul Bagguely, *et al.*, *Restructuring: Place, Class and Gender*, London 1990, pp. 137-43. See also John R. Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place*, Berkeley 1987, pp. 99-123; Edward M. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Contemporary Social Theory*, London 1989, pp. 44-75.

for and the chance to win a few victories for themselves and for the future. The workers' city was first of all an enactment of values and aspirations deeply embedded in working-class life, not some mimicry of middle-class life paths.¹³ The consumption of housing and other goods was to a degree a seizing of space, an inversion of the 'proper' uses of a provided city, and the acting out of a long history of working-class domesticity and security.¹⁴ The workers' city was what could be won from a world which could not be trusted to provide much, nor necessarily to provide it for very long. If it trapped people in mortgages and credit and the need to earn a decent wage, it was also felt as an achievement.

How then to see and hear this creativity and these accommodations? One can look for ordinary people in the fragments of local speech which make it into the public record, or perhaps in the words of more powerful actors describing their 'clients'. But to restrict myself only to those sources would mean distorting the workers' city; aside from their patronising and punitive language, they simply ignore many of the important people, especially women. I also rely, therefore, on descriptions of working-class life in other Australian and British places, recognising that these are localised performances in their own right and must be deployed with care.

But in speaking of Elizabeth, I am not speaking of a distant place I approach only as historian-outsider. For Elizabeth was also my place, a town I lived in for seventeen years. To write this as history, however, means speaking from a position which straddles the insider/outsider divide, a divide that Elizabeth's people have always invested with great significance. I am no longer the person who saw and heard, I am now the person who lives outside, who remembers and records. This raises questions of

¹³ See especially Geraldine Pratt, 'Incorporation Theory and the Reproduction of Community Fabric', in Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear (eds), *The Power of Geography: How Territory Shapes Social Life*, Boston 1989, pp. 293-315.

¹⁴ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 30-41. On the history of domesticity, see especially R.E. Pahl and C.D. Wallace, 'Neither Angels in Marble nor Rebels in Red: Privatization and Working-Class Consciousness', in David Rose (ed.), *Social Stratification and Economic Change*, London 1988, pp. 127-49; on differing priorities in ownership, see Peter Williams, 'The Politics of Property: Home Ownership in Australia', in John Halligan and Chris Paris (eds), *Australian Urban Politics: Critical Perspectives*, Melbourne 1984, pp. 167-92.

approach and sources: like Drusilla Modjeska, I must wonder if memory is 'evidence'.¹⁵ I must also ponder the relationship between reminiscence and history.¹⁶ Who am I speaking of? Who am I speaking to and for, if not simply telling my life-story to myself? My 'Elizabeth' is necessarily a partial one, and it is probably at odds with the Elizabeth other people remember. The workers' city is my way of rendering some experiences which are close and others which are — because of who I was and who I came to be — seen only at a distance.

I can at least refuse the gaze of social pathology, the punitive commonsense of the 'problem estate'. My Elizabeth, indeed, is one way of interrupting this idea that pathology and inadequacy are the dominant features of working-class suburbs. Yet I must be wary of inventing a culture and of nostalgia, or of mobilising memory to justify myself. I cannot speak for all Elizabeths, but neither can Elizabeth simply be a personal memorial. I must instead inhabit the unstable ground between memory and history. But recognising that all historical writing is partial and self-reflecting is more of a start than a conclusion. The point is not to minutely examine our own positions, as if that was politics enough. The trajectory must be towards the social realm, on to the ground where memories and histories exert their power and leave their traces in the lives and the chances of people.

The point must be to see the workers' city for its successes and failures, its solidarities and its exclusions. Elizabeth was one place for being and becoming, a terrain for everyday life and everyday tactics. It was a turf, a common history, a place where 'everyone is in the same boat.'¹⁷ But this masks the divisions which remained, despite the apparent solidarity of

¹⁵ Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy*, Melbourne 1990. Other explorations of historical and territorial positioning in memory are in Drusilla Modjeska (ed.), *Inner Cities: Australian Women's Memory of Place*, Melbourne 1989.

¹⁶ Meaghan Morris, 'Things to Do with Shopping Centres', in Susan Sheridan (ed.), *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, London 1988, pp. 193-225.

¹⁷ Quoted in 'Midlands Accent in an Australian Town', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 February 1964, in 'Elizabeth-Salisbury: Cuttings, Etc.', volume held in Elizabeth Public Library Local History Collection. On 'turf' and territorial consciousness, see Kevin R. Cox, 'The Politics of Turf and the Question of Class', in Wolch and Dear (eds), *The Power of Geography*, pp. 61-90.

common goals.¹⁸ Effectively, Elizabeth ‘worked’ for two groups of people: those who could locate themselves in the mainstream of working-class life, whether by good management or good luck, and those who were able to use its resources to propel themselves out of their class and, often, out of Elizabeth as well. Those who were ruled out were usually those whose experiences of Elizabeth were dominated by constraint and outside intervention: the welfare poor and the ‘problem families’, deserted and divorced women, those without skills or job security in a narrow and often unstable labour market, those without cars in an outer suburb, older people and single people in a town built for nuclear families. How they fared depended upon all the intricacies of personality, and the intensely local readings of failure and success. The single woman parent in one street, with a network of female or kin support, had a dramatically different experience of the workers’ city from the ‘problem’ families abandoned and despised by their neighbours. Access to the core of the workers’ city was always determined by the vagaries of stability and prosperity. In Elizabeth, as in every other working-class suburb in Australia, some got more stability and more prosperity than others. Even for those who made it, this was a temporary command over a limited turf. And it would turn out to be a precarious victory.

* * *

The forces which empowered and constrained the workers’ city were always experienced in gender terms. Womanhood was lived in the gendered landscape of a new suburb, which organised spaces and the paths between them in terms of what women and men were supposed to do. Designed as a series of interlocking ‘neighbourhood units’, each with about five thousand residents, Elizabeth was meant to provide closed spaces in which women’s activities could be conducted without undue movement outside their own patch. Each unit was centred on a shopping centre and primary school and bounded by wide arterial roads; smaller roads, alleys and footpaths guided walkers to the centre or to the open spaces which separated neighbourhoods from each other. Elizabeth’s women lived on their feet, pushing prams,

¹⁸ Lyn Richards, *Nobody’s Home: Dreams and Realities in a New Suburb*, Melbourne 1990, pp. 47-67.

dragging toddlers and carrying shopping back and forth within the spaces designed for them. If they were renters, they lived in the semi-detached double-units which clustered along dog-legged crescents, courts and streets. On their way to shops or schools, they would pass through Elizabeth's 'front', the detached, owner-occupied bungalows which lined the major roads and faced the parks. The planners' Elizabeth gave you messages about status and worth, not just gender.

Yet women used and understood this landscape in their own terms, whatever the planners may have intended. On the rare occasions their views were recorded, they stressed their own imperatives and interests.¹⁹ A 1973 survey, conducted at the Town Centre and therefore dominated by women's voices, praised shops, layout, housing and the provision of open spaces while stressing women's interests in improved daytime transportation, more facilities for youth and more commercial entertainments, especially a cinema.²⁰ In the same year, a local group wrote and produced a commentary of life in Elizabeth for a planning consultation on the proposed new town of Monarto. These women and men highlighted the "boredom and lack of a sense of purpose" among women working in the home, the "mindless monotony of production-line work", the burden of the hire-purchase and the "dreams of making fortunes at 'Bingo' to be released from production-line drudgery."²¹ Elizabeth was good and bad, the rough with the smooth. But for the most part, it was a good place to be. Whatever its problems, the workers' city was certainly better than anything most had known before. Best of all was being left alone to get on with it, in a solid house with a yard and indoor plumbing, surrounded by your own kind, in a place where pretentiousness was as strongly prohibited as bad behaviour.

¹⁹ Ruth Madigan, Moira Munro and Susan J. Smith, 'Gender and the Meaning of the Home', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 14, 1990, pp. 625-47.

²⁰ Australian Frontier Elizabeth Sub-Panel, "S.C.O.R.E. for Elizabeth (S.A.): A Short Report on What 3589 Residents Considered 'Best' and 'Worst' Features of their City", February 1973, ms. in SAHT Library, Adelaide. Two-thirds of the respondents were women and there was an even representation in terms of age, neighbourhood and length of residence.

²¹ Australian Frontier, *Consultation on the Planning of the New Town of Murray — Lessons from Elizabeth*, Adelaide 1973, p. 8.

That could breed antagonism to difference, and it certainly meant an intolerance of outsiders. Yet one of Elizabeth's major virtues was the solidarity that came from shared troubles and shared expectations. And that solidarity was something women tended to define around their own activities:

I used to find that those people who lived there, the more problems they had, the more children they had, you might say they had very little of the niceties of life, but they were the salt of the earth. If you were in trouble, they would be the women who would help you. Not the snobby little lady who had the beautifully clean house.²²

The slide from 'people' to 'women' (and the opposition of 'women' to 'lady') is a revealing depiction of how women understood 'their place'. The idea that Elizabeth was or is a 'working man's town', with its implicit assumption that women were minor partners in a patriarchal working-class world, is one only outsiders could assert with any confidence. Gender divisions in Elizabeth were as much about women's ability to create and confirm the core territories of life as they were about the power of male planners or husbands' wages. Elizabeth was and is hard work for women, a place of restrictions and sometimes of fear and danger. Yet it was also a town in which, alone and together, they carved out a place for themselves and for others which they understood as worthy of defence and dignity.

Tracing what womanhood meant in Elizabeth is no easy task. Their encounters with Elizabeth were shaped by age, marital status and occupation: there was no one 'women's Elizabeth', even if many women shared similar experiences. Moreover, 'interior' femininity, womanhood deep down, was mostly hidden from my view and is almost completely absent from the sources. Yet I am less interested in tracing the precise chronologies and intricate interiors of private life than in describing, in general terms, the public womanhood lived in families and in the relations of kin, street, work and neighbourhood, the 'women's Elizabeth' which I could see. I also focus mainly on married and adult women and their roles

²² Interview with Mrs. Bobbie Ryan by Averil Holt, 1 March 1982, p. 37, in South Australian Housing Trust, Oral History Collection [hereafter SAHT, OHC], held in SAHT Library, Adelaide.

within households, deploying what evidence there is in oral histories and the written record, referring to other descriptions of working-class femininity, and utilising my memories of gender and family. All speak two basic truths. First, in the lived and remembered histories of British and Australian working-class life, women's competence and skill in households were what really mattered in turning a hard grind into a decent existence.²³ These histories were brought to Elizabeth and shaped the performance of gender relations in the town. Second, while the roles of wife and mother did not preclude other roles — as worker, unionist, or neighbour — they invariably shaped them around the central tenet of working-class womanhood: that family came first, like it or not.

In a working-class and migrant suburb, making a place always meant earning and spending money, which in turn meant working for wages. However, those who designed the town as a self-sufficient industrial 'satellite' did not consider the importance of women's contributions to family income. Married women, especially, were not expected to work. The Housing Trust did eventually realise the potential attractions of a pool of female labour for industry, even luring textile companies with the prospect of English women with experience in Manchester's cotton mills.²⁴ Cheap women, too, were a handy bait for manufacturers from countries unlucky enough to have equal pay legislation.²⁵ Yet women's work lives, and especially the issue of access to work, were never planning imperatives.²⁶ Residents constantly complained about the shortage of local

23 See Ellen Ross, "'Fierce Questions and Taunts": Married Life in Working-Class London, 1870-1914', in David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds), *Metropolis-London: Histories and Representations since 1800*, London 1989, pp. 219-44. On the importance of women's competence in Australian working-class life, see McCalman, *Struggletown*, pp. 193-6.

24 Letter from K. Phillips to the director of an English clothing firm, 18 May 1961, in South Australian Housing Trust, Central Records Collection, Public Record Office, Adelaide: GA 127, GRS 1281, Box 340, folder 2003.

25 K. Phillips, Report 8 on an American electrical equipment firm, 30 August 1963, unpublished ms., held in SAHT Library, Adelaide.

26 Clive Forster, 'The Journey to Work and a Satellite Town: The Cautionary Example of Elizabeth', *Australian Geographical Studies*, vol. 12, 1974, pp. 3-26.

jobs for women. Men were also considerably more mobile, while young and single women were able to commute to Adelaide. With little access to private transport, most married women faced competition for restricted local opportunities, with all the difficulties of organising child care and household labour. For the small but significant number of divorced, widowed or deserted women heading households by themselves, the difficulties were enormous. For married women with small children, problems with finding space for work outside the home could be exacerbated by the character of local manual employment, which often involved changing rounds of shift work for men, or by the number of men who worked at the nearby Weapons Research Establishment and could spend weeks at a time at the testing sites at Woomera. By the end of the 1960s, other men were working for months on the gas fields at Moomba or taking better-paid jobs in places like Whyalla or Port Augusta. In some Elizabeth streets, adult men were hard to find on weekends and at night, let alone from nine to five.

For all that, at any one moment in the 1960s and 1970s, around forty per cent of Elizabeth's married women were working in paid jobs, alongside a slightly higher proportion of single women. About a third of employed married women worked part-time.²⁷ The rates in the 1970s are broadly similar to the Australian averages, except for a higher rate for married women, which is consistent with the finding that British migrant women were more likely to work outside the home than the Australian-born.²⁸ These figures are, of course, rather suspect, because some paid work was 'unofficial' domestic labour or child care for other working women.

The role of women's paid work in household economies was always significant, especially in moving the household clear of any threat of dependency on charity or the state. In Clive Forster's 1972 snapshot of 321

27 The participation rates for all women were 36.4% in 1966, 40.6% in 1971 and 44.0% in 1976. For married women, they were unavailable in 1966, 36.9% in 1971 and 42.8% in 1976. Figures calculated from published and unpublished data from the Commonwealth Bureau of the Census and Statistics [CBS] and the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] for Elizabeth LGA and the relevant collection districts in Munno Para LGA.

28 Cora V. Baldock, 'Public Policies and the Paid Work of Women', in Bettina Cass and Cora V. Baldock (eds), *Women, Social Policy and the State*, Sydney 1982, pp. 20-53.

Elizabeth households, about half contained at least two earners, mostly both parents but sometimes the husband and older children.²⁹ The survey showed a clear temporal rhythm to married women's participation, which maximised family earnings prior to and near the end of the child-rearing phase. At any one time, different households were at very different stages of this family cycle. And the veneer of a 'family community' hid those families and households who lacked male wages or two incomes and were usually suffering real hardship. Certainly, most Elizabeth families worked on the principle that women's paid labour should be intermittent. But the idea that a single wage can generate the good life all of the time is one only the very comfortable can afford.

For many women, whatever the importance of work to family income and living standards, the assumptions of working-class marriage and of powerful public and private institutions degraded their role as paid workers, except as an intermittent contribution to the family wage. Accepted local versions of womanhood and manhood prescribed different tasks for women and men in creating and confirming 'our place', and paid work never occupied a central place in married womanhood. There is no doubt that women's jobs had a distinct impact on family income and living standards. But women's earning power mattered mainly in the positioning of households which most men and almost every outside institution defined in terms of the man's job. Each woman was part of a 'family project', and her paid work was first of all meant to be a way of securing the gains of the good times or tiding the household over in bad, whatever she made of it.

Because of interrupted careers, the small number of openings for part-time work in white-collar and professional jobs, and changing patterns of qualification, many women could in fact increase family income and manage domestic responsibilities only by taking jobs well below their skills. In this way, women could end up degrading their own occupational status in the pursuit of family financial security. If families broke up, women could suddenly find themselves underqualified, dependent on state benefits and even unemployable despite years of paid work. Marriages did not have to function this way. In some families, the extent of women's contributions,

²⁹ Forster, "The Journey to Work", p. 17.

the personalities of the partners, or the pressure of maintaining higher standards of consumption undermined the idea that women's work was only ever temporary. Long-term participation, perhaps especially in work which women enjoyed or valued, may have led to significant reinterpretations of women's work in some marriages. But ideas about manhood and womanhood, alongside the way outside forces defined households, consistently confirmed men's economic superiority and women's economic dependence, at least as a long-term outcome of married life.

The centrality of paid work to male identity also precluded any shift away from this definition of gender roles, because the ability to 'keep' a wife and children was crucial to masculine adequacy. In Elizabeth, being a man meant providing for a family. That was it. Men worked, men got paid and men brought their wages home. The pub, the darts and masculine solidarity were times away from married manhood, not its core. Such assumptions within marriage were also confirmed by realistic understandings of the unequal earning power of men and women and the structuring of state and other benefits in terms of male breadwinners.³⁰ Working-class marriages involved the negotiation of inequalities enshrined in legislation and policy, not just a series of personal bargains.

Nor did long-boom prosperity weaken the expectation that men provided for households. Changing consumption and reproduction priorities — hire purchase, home ownership, longer education for children — may have increased the importance of women's ability to earn. Yet the remaining insecurities and problems of working-class life provided little incentive for men and women to swap roles. If most people were no longer living on the edge, they could remember what it felt like. Women's lives did not centre on paid work — and men's lives centred on little else — because that seemed the best way to manage. Men could earn more, they had access to overtime, and they were protected and serviced far better by unions. Whatever the personal bargains involved, hard realities made other choices difficult. All women worked at some time. Women in careers, in work they valued for whatever reason, could even try and make room for working life at the core of personal identity. Within individual marriages,

³⁰ See Mike Donaldson, *Time of our Lives: Labour and Love in the Working Class*, Sydney 1991, pp. 21-30.

that could perhaps be done without serious conflict. But anything more dramatic meant confronting expectations which were very hard to stand against, not least that working-class husbands' personally crucial investments in their status as providers were endorsed and empowered by every outside institution.

But to assume from the subordinate status of their paid labour that women played the minor role in making Elizabeth a valued place is to seriously misread working-class gender relations. Women's roles in securing and defending both households and the workers' city emerge most clearly *outside* the world of work.³¹ What women did within households, streets and neighbourhoods was absolutely central to social identity and to the successful management of resources. Paid work was simply not the most important way they defined their place. To this extent, descriptions of class identity which focus only on work and male economic power miss the point, by over-emphasising one role — the breadwinner — over others. Women did not make Elizabeth by working for wages, though their paid labour always played an important role in security, possession and comfort. Theirs was the harder task of translating wages into outcomes. And that was something most men recognised, whatever they said in the pub and however denigrating and patronising they were towards 'their' women.

I am not asserting that women were somehow 'happier' as unpaid domestic labourers, nor that there is some innate dichotomy between womanhood and waged work. Instead, I am suggesting that Elizabeth's women, like working-class women in other places, largely fashioned their adult lives and identities outside the world of paid work. This particular manifestation of divided gender roles was, to that extent, self-defined and self-maintained. It accommodated the fact of unequal earning power and the importance of the breadwinner identity to men, while asserting the status and even greater importance of what women did. It also expressed women's realistic understanding of what they confronted in factories, shops and offices. Going to work meant going from one way of living class and

³¹ See Nicola Charles, 'Women and Class — A Problematic Relationship?', *Sociological Review*, vol. 38, 1990, pp. 43-89; M. Huxley and H.P.M. Winchester, 'Residential Differentiation and Social Reproduction: The Interrelation of Class, Gender and Space', *Environment and Planning D*, vol. 9, 1991, pp. 233-40.

gender to another, where the everyday burdens of being female were spiced with the exploitations and alienations of wage labour. Ideals of domestic responsibility and motherhood had a powerful relevance to women whose other usual choice was low-paid, hum-drum and sometimes demeaning work, usually for a male boss. For many women, it may have been a case of better the devil you know.

Of course, this antagonism between work and women's identity as mother and wife hardly emerged by itself, not least because unions consistently preached and practised the idea that married women, especially, were not 'real' workers. At a mass meeting at General Motors-Holdens Elizabeth plant in 1977, one male unionist suggested that married women voluntarily stand down to avoid the retrenchment of 'breadwinners'. Women workers shouted him down and prevented a vote on the issue; accepting different gender roles didn't mean putting up with male self-importance or the notion that women's paid labour was somehow frivolous and unnecessary.³² Unions, too, maintained a powerful vigilance against "the encroach of female labour in sections accepted as the province of males", especially in the car industry.³³ This was a powerful constraint upon women's work life, however large a role it played in men's solidarity against management. Women were, in fact, active unionists in Elizabeth, especially in the trim fabrication section at the GMH plant. A meeting of an ACTU committee was told in 1968 that the "rank and file have come to life and the women members in one section have set the pace".³⁴ Where the ability of a section to participate in plant-wide actions was important, women-dominated areas might play a key role, but even here male stewards and male-dominated unions did not necessarily question their assumptions about gender roles. Indeed, they were more likely to use women's activism to shame inactive men.

³² *The Advertiser*, 4 May 1977.

³³ Letter from the Federal Secretary, VBEF, to Secretary, ACTU, 5 March 1965, in Australian Council of Trade Unions, Minutes, Correspondence and General Records, Noel Butlin Archives Centre: N21/2150.

³⁴ Minutes of the Vehicle Industry Co-ordinating Committee, 27 July 1968, in *ibid*.

This construction of womanhood was continually endorsed and re-created by the powerful institutions of mass communication penetrating the working-class world, by schools and by the structure of state benefits and programs, as well as by unions. At the same time, with equal pay legislation and the first stirrings of equal opportunity or gender neutrality, Australian women at last succeeded in pushing decision-making institutions towards fairer practices, at least during the 1970s. The impact of these gains was, however, uneven. Women in public sector jobs, with recognised qualifications and work experience, or in households where their wages played the pivotal role in family security, could take advantage of fairer procedures far more easily than others. Legislation, enforcement and practice were always partial and contingent. At the local level, meanwhile, interruptions to the structure of gender privilege were further tempered by traditions, established bargains and persistent inequities in earning power, union protection and job security.

Yet working-class women were not somehow suckered into inferiority, or simply held down by oppressing men. They were deeply aware, if anyone was, of the contradictions and limitations of their lives and their narrow choices. Some single women would choose to escape them, which invariably meant leaving Elizabeth as well. But for many women in the 1960s, marriage and children made sense as “liberating events” which established independence from the parental home, gave opportunity for endorsed sexual relations, and provided a measure of personal power.³⁵ After all, work for the home and the family was ‘real’ work, the labour of love and care, “the *proper* work which offered them a place at the centre of family life, and, through that, status and power.”³⁶ The working-class celebration of motherhood and domesticity — by women and men — can only make sense if it is accepted as authentic within the context of accumulated and lived experience. Most important, women’s roles were not secondary because they were centred on the home and the neighbourhood. Those, after all, were the pivots of working-class life. And the idea that women had a legitimate and even ultimate power and authority over those places was part of how girls learned to be women and boys to be men. Of

³⁵ Westwood, *All Day, Every Day*, p. 103.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 169. See also Donaldson, *Time of our Lives*, pp. 35-55.

course, women's power at home was always contingent on men's acceptance of that role, and working-class women are quick to offer wry assessments of the limits of 'their place'. But the households where men ruled and women and children suffered were examples of failure, not success. It is a cruel commonsense indeed which mistakes deviant behaviour for accepted class practice.

Another common assumption about working-class life explains women's power in terms of poverty: women accept the burden of management because otherwise the family cannot survive. It might seem logical, then, that long-boom prosperity would have shifted power back towards men. I doubt that Elizabeth's women would affirm that their economic and emotional responsibilities suddenly waned as higher wages for men and the slight redistributions of welfare systems decreased the family's absolute dependence on their performance as managers. Indeed, the idea that increasing household resources and security automatically removed the logic of female responsibility or diminished women's central importance in working-class households is offensive. It assumes that these roles were dictated by privation alone and would be happily relinquished given a degree of comfort. It arrogantly transposes supposed middle-class norms down the class scale (as usual, without any of the matching resources). At the very least, it deforms the complexities of household organisation and marital negotiations in both classes in order to equate matriarchy with poverty and patriarchy with affluence.

Prosperity did not instantaneously strip working-class women of their organisational and moral authority, even as it made life a little easier. Nor did it suddenly make men's earnings the only arbiter of family security and success. It is more likely, in my memory, that the management of the long boom at the household and the neighbourhood level largely remained women's responsibility, especially in blue-collar households. It was women's strategies, their skills and their links to networks of support outside the home that to a large degree determined how successfully the resources of prosperity were deployed. Women's roles, in that sense, were far more exacting than men's, though male breadwinners hardly had it 'easy'. The burden of making a wage, with all the fears of sickness, injury

or job loss, was no bed of roses. Women's responsibilities, meanwhile, imposed a heavy burden and implied an important status. They kept the kids fed and the wolves from the door; this was women's lot, women's life, women's constant chore. And it was what women did because no one else was strong enough or smart enough to do it.

Within each family, women's lot could include any number of demanding tasks. Most retained the burden of responsibility for family size, with or without active participation from husbands. Restricting family size to the children you could afford remained a vital element in family strategies, just as it had in harder times, and it could also be an important individual victory for women's health.³⁷ Child-rearing and domestic labour were also women's work, though this was recognised by outsiders as 'headship' only in the event of desertion, male incapacity or widowhood. The differences between 'good' and 'bad' households were almost all part of a female economy of household management and display. Clean houses, clean children and well-fed husbands came only from women's activity. Of course, responsibility and status had their downside: women were usually the first to be blamed for the bad behaviour and slovenly appearance of family members. In Elizabeth, nothing much came easy.

Responsibility always meant negotiations and potential conflicts with husbands, especially over money. Yet most Elizabeth's marriages, from my experience, copied the accepted pattern of substantial and sometimes total female responsibility for the management of family money and family time. In some cases men gave all of their wages to their wives and received a weekly allowance, in others they kept some back for personal use or gave their wives only the basic wage, keeping overtime pay or bonuses to themselves. Some couples, including my parents, established joint decision-making, in part because these women had higher or more secure incomes than their husbands.³⁸ Even then, in my family, it was the 'housekeeping

³⁷ See McCalman, *Struggletown*, pp. 43-4 and 245-7; Sally Alexander, 'Becoming a Woman in the 1920s and 1930s', in Feldman and Jones (eds), *Metropolis London*, pp. 245-71.

³⁸ Elizabeth's working women were more likely to be in professional positions like teaching and nursing or in clerical and sales jobs than Elizabeth's men, most of whom were tradesmen, semi-skilled operatives or labourers. Given the level of women's wages and their often interrupted participation, and the status of tradesmen in places like Elizabeth, this did not necessarily mean that these women were

purse' that dispensed extras and treats, and the 'spare money purse' which indicated we could cope with the odd financial emergency. As a child, I don't think I even knew my father had money, let alone a wallet to put it in.

In other families, men used money to exert dominance. Even in more equitable situations, wherever men were the sole or major earners, the capacity of women to manage rested on the strength of the partnership and the husband's commitment to accepted and appropriate family behaviour. Respectable manhood did not insist on sobriety and thrift simply for the sake of his good health. Women did what was needed to make sure the money made it home, demanding an unopened pay packet or actually going to the workplace on payday to collect the packet from their husband or the payroll office. Mothers also raised sons to be 'good men' in family terms: no drinking or swearing at home, no fighting, no stealing from your own kind, no notions you were 'more entitled' than anyone else, no 'keeping back' or wasting what rightfully belonged to everyone. And they raised daughters to expect at least that from their partners.

With the widening of consumption opportunities and demands, women's economic management roles conceivably widened as well, though husbands might take responsibility for major items, especially cars. In Elizabeth, everyone who could bought a television, but most also needed furniture because few migrants could afford to bring it with them. Expensive goods were often bought on credit: if Elizabeth was built on good wages, it was also built on the hire purchase, despite the general fear of debt. Buying decisions might be taken jointly, but women generally managed the credit relationship. Relations with salesmen were not always harmonious — one resident remembered the reps who "descended like vultures on the community" — and women attempted to handle the

accorded a higher status than their husbands. Nor did it mean that these were the so-called 'cross-class households', where the marriage partners are in a somehow separate occupational class to 'true' blue-collar households. Local definitions of status or identity, among men and women, did not necessarily accord either those of the census or with the expectations of middle-class observers that anyone wearing a white collar had to be seen as superior. For the debate on the issue of 'cross-class' marriages, see especially Nicky Britten and Anthony Heath, "Women, Men and Social Class", in Eva Gamarnikow, *et al.*, (eds), *Gender, Class and Work*, London 1983, pp. 46-60 and Michelle Stanworth, "Women and Class Analysis: A Reply to John Goldthorpe", *Sociology*, vol. 18, 1984, pp. 159-70.

relationship in their own terms.³⁹ For those who “fell into the trap” of over-commitment, the Good Neighbour group and the Elizabeth Counselling Centre provided help and sometimes financial aid; other, more dramatic strategies might involve confronting repossessioners and salesmen.⁴⁰ Another problem for women in their attempts to direct and manage such potentially dangerous financial relationships, of course, was that the finance institutions prioritised husbands in the credit relationship, against working-class tradition. For women in unstable or unequal marriages, or heading households on their own, this made an already precarious economic status even worse.⁴¹

If women handled direct contacts with market institutions which ignored their skills and responsibilities, they also handled relationships with other kinds of ignorant authority. In Elizabeth, married women largely managed the ‘outside’ of the home, its links with the public sphere. That could mean maintaining standards of family status, representing their families in public institutions like schools, dealing with external authorities, or joining in work-based conflicts. In general, women sought to exert some control over the important spaces of life and even, perhaps, to improve them by way of collective activity in such groups as school councils. Local government, and activities like lobbying and committee work, were mostly male preserves and dominated anyway by the small but vocal band of middle-class residents who lived in the ‘better’ sales housing. Nor were most public institutions — with the occasional exception of schools — all that interested in local working-class involvement, let alone that of working-class women. Women’s management of the ‘outside’ of the home was less a matter of working within the ‘system’, which provided them with few openings anyway, than of organising and controlling, as far as possible, the

³⁹ Interview with Mrs. S. Hall by Susan Marsden, 17 August 1982, p. 7, in SAHT, OHC.

⁴⁰ Ryan interview, p. 15, in SAHT, OHC.

⁴¹ See Watson, *Accommodating Inequality*, pp. 42-55; Lois Bryson, ‘Gender Divisions and Power Relationships in the Australian Family’, in Paul Close and Rosemary Collins (eds), *Family and Economy in Modern Society*, Basingstoke 1985, pp. 83-100.

extent to which that system affected the lives and the chances of people within the home, especially the children.

After all, perhaps the most frequent manifestation of the system was not participation, or involvement, but intrusion. Most families — especially those which failed to fit official norms of ‘completeness’ — were subject to ‘visits’ by outside agencies, and women almost invariably dealt with them. For renting households, they might be from the tenancy officer inquiring about the proper uses of rooms or about maintenance, something that women often took as an affront to their high domestic standards.⁴² If the family was ‘incapacitated’ or ‘incomplete’, the intruders might be ‘the welfare’ or the police. Sadly, agencies which had the power to intervene in families were almost invariably blind to the economic and emotional roles of working-class women, most notably in their assumption that every home needed a man, rather than simply a ‘male’ wage.

Structures of bargaining between women and outside agents, whether salesmen or social workers, were not simply ad-hoc. Individual conventions reflected and in turn maintained localised and largely female-maintained territories in streets and neighbourhoods. Despite rapid in-migration and the mobility of households between different parts of Elizabeth, women in more established households perpetuated these territories, usually a few streets at most. Women in mobile households would fit in, or, if everyone was new, would re-create agreed neighbourhood conventions and standards amongst themselves. These coalitions provided mutual aid, friendship and support. As in other working-class areas, they were also a way for women to manage intrusions by external authorities. Women directed authorities to ‘problem families’, especially if they feared involvement. The Trust, or the police, would always hear of disruptive or deviant households.⁴³ In this way, the link between family and neighbourhood standards could be maintained without undermining the principle of ‘keeping to yourself’ or the appearance of solidarity. In Elizabeth, women articulated local standards

⁴² See Jos Boys, ‘From Alcatraz to the OK Corral: Images of Class and Gender’, in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds), *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*, London 1989, pp. 39-54.

⁴³ For similar practices in another Housing Trust area in Adelaide, Jean I. Martin, ‘Suburbia: Community and Network’, in A.F. Davies and S. Encel (eds), *Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction*, 2nd ed., Melbourne 1970, pp. 301-39.

and local practices to each other, to men, and to outsiders. And as they did, they expressed their solidarity as ordinary women, doing their best in a place which they valued and cared for, even if no-one else did.

Such networks also provided important material supports. Working women, in particular, relied on neighbours for child care and the sharing of domestic tasks because they preferred not to have strangers in the home.⁴⁴ Neighbouring was an important and sometimes vexing activity, always in tension with a much-valued family privacy. Semi-detached housing demanded negotiation, because next door was just a thin party wall away, but people still expected to maintain their privacy. Women who needed help, because of violent or irresponsible husbands, ratty kids or simply the pressures and boredom of domestic routine, had to seek it out. The strictures against interfering were very strong, and neighbouring women couldn't always offer much anyway, beyond a bit of child-minding and an attentive ear. But if women needed aid, they would certainly get it, even if relations with their neighbours were not good. A fairly general prosperity may have diminished the immediate importance of local support and even policing networks, but if "in Elizabeth we were one big family", it was women who made sure of it.⁴⁵

Kin ties were another significant resource and relationship for working-class households. Detailed analyses of English life consistently stressed the matrifocal nature of these kin relationships, most famously in Young and Willmott's *Bethnal Green*, but also on the newer post-war estates.⁴⁶ Evidence from Elizabeth suggests that English migrants, especially young women, suffered from the breaking of kin ties through migration: "it was wanting mum to come out, that was the whole big problem".⁴⁷ It is likely that 'Mum' symbolised a whole series of supports

44 As Bryson and Thompson found in Newtown: see *An Australian Newtown*, pp. 71-4.

45 Ryan interview, p. 8, in SAHT, OHC.

46 Willmott and Young, *Family and Kinship*, pp. 44-88; Willmott, *Evolution of a Community*, pp. 110-26.

47 Ryan interview, p. 17, in SAHT, OHC.

and informal services that were absent in a raw, new suburb: child care, emotional support, a friendly kitchen for a chat and a visit.⁴⁸ The value of kin ties, especially the importance of grandmothers, was taken for granted in the families I knew. While geographical mobility and public tenancy certainly made it difficult to maintain or to re-create kin ties, families who migrated together or were able to bring out relatives managed to establish kin networks in Elizabeth all the same. Again, this was mostly at the initiation of women, even if the kin actually ‘belonged’ to their husbands, though married sons, too, were expected to be diligent about seeing their mothers. Meanwhile, residents bargained with the Trust over its housing allocation and migration policies, especially in regards to bringing mothers out from Britain. The Trust did provide more space within the migration program for parents, though housing provision for the elderly and for widows remained a problem well into the 1970s.

In general, the workers’ city depended very much on the vigilance and capacity of women. Of course, the prosperity of households, neighbourhoods and Elizabeth itself also relied on male capacities in the breadwinner role. And Elizabeth’s women, no less than other Australian women, faced disempowerment and marginalisation at work and from the patriarchal practices of public and private institutions. If they were outside a ‘complete’, male-headed, household, their experience of what that meant was direct and often painful. But within the working-class family, things were not so clear-cut. The successful deployment of prosperity within the household could never rely simply on male wages or male competence, because those alone would never be enough to steer a family away from real or potential hardship. Women’s skills — including their ability to secure work away from home while also performing most of the work within it — were vital.

A good marriage was never simply patriarchal, because men’s *and* women’s understandings of gender placed women at the heart of family strategies and responsibilities and at the core of the most fundamental relationships in working-class life: family, kin, neighbourhood. Work was a

48 My thanks to Martha Macintyre for this insight.

male preserve, but assembly line or routine work was not necessarily all that meaningful beyond the wages it provided. A skilled trade certainly provided individual as well as family status. All working men would vigorously defend the breadwinner role, because it was so essential to manhood, and some men routinely escaped into realms where women were not welcome. But neither the factory floor nor the front bar could provide an emotional core for working-class life. And if men defended their role as providers, they were defending a role which, if it gave them economic power over women, did not give them untrammelled power over the relationships and decisions which defined 'our place'. Men's place, beyond work, was likely to be the shed or the garden, maybe the pub, certainly the car. But the house, and much of the local territory beyond it, was women's responsibility and women's preserve. Men defended the workers' city on the factory floor. But everywhere else, Elizabeth's guardians were almost always women.

Of course, women's place always included men, as husbands, fathers and sons, as well as employers or agents of authority. Their experience of men could be one of personal comfort, satisfaction and emotional warmth. But the integrity of 'their place' could always be undermined by those very same men. Women's command over homes and streets, and their moral and often material authority in family strategies, was perilous and always subject to the vagaries of economic conditions and male personality. If the long boom offered a little relief from the pressures of basic survival, its ups and downs still threw up daily challenges. Women dealt with external structures which favoured adult men and cemented women's economic dependence. They worked for employers who undervalued their skills and among men who expected them to be temporary workers. And their skills and energy reinforced ideas about working-class womanhood which many found limiting even if they did offer an arena of relative independence and self-management.

The perils of dependence could be even closer to home, in violent men or incapable men. The men who failed as good husbands were feared and loathed in Elizabeth, but they were somehow expected all the same, because masculinity and the problems of a hard life seemed bound to produce the odd basher, drunk or deserter. Some women faced the dangers of unstable masculinity in the home, others suffered the consequences when men left home for good, experiencing the association of 'matriarchy' with personal

and family failure. Moreover, working-class women experienced their solidarity with others in the context of the isolated and privatised household. Privacy was an achievement for people who had grown up with overcrowding, shared toilets and kitchens and no yards. While domestic-working women were often together, across the back fence, at the shops, or on the bus, in each home they could also be terribly alone. And households ultimately needed a 'male' wage. The hardest edge to women's place in the workers' city, and the strongest barrier to significant changes in gender roles during the long boom, was that only men could earn one.

Some women avoided the potential perils of the workers' city, by pursuing careers or staying at work, by not marrying, by moving away, perhaps most often by sheer skill and force of personality within established structures. Some marriages were partnerships, others, in local legend at least, were dominated by women. Overall, though, it was women who bore a major responsibility for making strategies work, and it was women, especially, who bore the brunt of failure. With resources, women could make a decent place. But you could never really trust it. This was not a 'golden age', and people remember the struggles and the limits as much as the achievements.

But Elizabeth did provide people with resources and chances. In that sense, Elizabeth was one product of an unusual time, a time of big government and public spending, when conservatives as much as progressives thought that putting a few resources in the path of ordinary people was a good idea. What was done with them remained a bone of contention, and those who redistributed would be continually perplexed by how these still meagre goods were increasingly expected as a right. But in a very real way, the years of Elizabeth's greatest success were also its years of greatest incapacitation. As they cemented their successes, Elizabeth's people simultaneously provided the signs of their failure: mass unionisation, deskilled factory work, technical rather than academic qualification, low school retention rates, credit-based consumption, and, worst of all, an expectation of state provision and state support for ordinary people.

The workers' city was not eventually destroyed by the inadequacies of its residents, nor by its 'unnatural' concentrations of public housing and working-class people. The ultimate limit of the workers' city, for all those who made it, was that the world they created was really valuable only to

them. Elizabeth would eventually have to be stripped bare and restructured to protect the investments of more powerful people. And it could be 'rationalised' so easily because this was, after all, only Elizabeth. What happens to it really doesn't matter.

Not that Elizabeth's people accept their fate in silence. As jobs disappeared and as short-sighted policy decisions turned public housing areas into residualised ghettos, some of those who made the workers' city left. Some stayed and preoccupied themselves with blaming the 'invaders' and the 'bludgers' for Elizabeth's problems. Others stayed to fight it out. In the 1990s, the scale of local political mobilisation goes hand in hand with rising unemployment — twenty-five per cent at last count — and the misery it brings. Prompted into public expression by social justice projects, they also reflect the powerful local knowledge that the city and the kind of people who live there have been let down. Perhaps their most significant feature, in terms of this discussion, is the strength of women's voices. While men still tend to dominate local government and local business associations, the Elizabeth which speaks outside such formal channels is now largely female, both residents and the local professionals who provide a kind of brokerage between locals and outside authorities. Women lead and dominate groups like the Northern Area Activist Group and the Adelaide North Group for Education Reform as well as support and advocacy organisations for single mothers and other disadvantaged residents. They are also highly visible in union job rallies and other protests. Moreover, it is women who normally represent communities in the media: Aboriginals, pensioners, single parents, or householders.

Outsiders will find this puzzling or exhilarating, according to their politics. Observers of local actions in other working-class areas, especially in Britain, have noted similar trends.⁴⁹ Why do women perform so many of the speaking and acting roles in poor places? One possibility is the increasing importance of a politics of consumption, welfare and services, the product of devolution and the intensification of welfare activity in bad

⁴⁹ Sue Brownhill and Susan Halford, 'Understanding Women's Involvement in Local Politics: How Useful is a Formal/Informal Dichotomy?', *Political Geography Quarterly*, vol. 9, 1990, pp. 396-414; Susan Halford, 'Spatial Divisions and Women's Initiatives in British Local Government', *Geoforum*, vol. 20, 1989, pp. 161-74.

economic times.⁵⁰ This is perhaps more accessible to women, more relevant to their lives and their knowledges of the city, than a politics which focuses on work-based distribution. Public institutions like schools are more open to — indeed increasingly reliant upon — local parents, which generally means women in working-class areas. With effort, meagre funding can be found for health and drop-in centres, neighbourhood houses and women's refuges in which women volunteers and workers share skills and develop a more public display of women's expertise. Perhaps women are simply heard more often. As a broad-based women's movement pushes female voices into the public sphere, so planning and policy, in their shift towards participation, flexibility and consultation, have also provided avenues for these voices, albeit more often to incorporate than to empower them.

In a place like Elizabeth, local activism on such issues as education and welfare funding reflects these changes. Yet women's activism is hardly a new feature of working-class suburbs, for it was always women's responsibility to define and manage the interior and exterior relations of households, streets and neighbourhoods. Recent activism is perhaps best understood as an extension of that established role, a speaking of and for Elizabeth which is now more likely to be heard and recognised by social planners and policy-makers. One question for future investigation is the role played by local economic crisis in the politicisation and greater public presence of women. Job loss is clearly devastating for men whose entire identity centres on paid work, and they are perhaps unlikely to shift suddenly into the kinds of organising activities considered to be 'women's work'. Parts of Elizabeth are indeed 'cities of women', in a way. This is in part because large numbers of single parent families live there, but also because it is women who use and inhabit the streets. The men are at home, waiting to work again.⁵¹ Unhappily, of course, the fact that women most often speak for this and other fringe places makes it even easier for some to

⁵⁰ Ruth Fincher, 'The Political Economy of the Local State', in Richard Peet and Nigel Thrift (eds), *New Models in Geography: The Political Economy Perspective*, London 1989, vol. 1, pp. 338-60; Ruth Fincher, 'Class and Gender Relations in the Local Labor Market and the Local State', in Wolch and Dear (eds), *The Power of Geography*; Bagguely *et al.*, *Restructuring*.

⁵¹ My thanks to Joan Russell (Elizabeth-Munno Para Social Justice Project) for her insights on this issue.

stigmatise them; after all, ‘everyone knows’ that women’s power is suppressed in normal circumstances, emerging only from the tragic deficiencies of ‘damaged’ communities.

Women have always had to deal with the limits of Elizabeth, as well as with the limits of their place within it. And they tend to speak for everybody, not just for themselves. They speak for a community in which they, as women, suffer particular but not unique burdens. What they demand in their activism is chances, a better deal, someone to control the process of restructuring and rationalisation which is ripping places like Elizabeth apart. They want good schools, safety and security, the things that working-class people depend on to make a decent life, the things powerful people think only money should be able to buy. If governments and agencies want to actually interrupt the highly punitive geography of restructuring and a market-led recovery, then it is these demands they must hear. Not more efficient targeting, not environmental beautification and a renovated village, certainly not the self-serving fantasies of the economic rationalists. What Elizabeth wants is jobs and the chances they bring: jobs for women, jobs for men, especially jobs for kids. Without jobs, people simply can’t make a go of it, however efficient the delivery of welfare services and however pleasant the surrounds. Meanwhile, changes in participation patterns or wage inequalities don’t mean a lot in a place where jobs are disappearing and where married *and* single women are less likely to be at work now than in the 1970s.⁵² Wage justice and equal opportunity are important and still incomplete victories. Benefit structures and financial institutions are slowly abandoning practices that always penalised women. But these are hollow gains so long as the hard lines of class and locational disadvantage — which divide women as much as men — remain unacknowledged or unidentified.

⁵² Participation rates for adult women aged between 20 and 65 (slightly different from those used in footnote 27, which refer to all women over the age of 15) were 38% in 1976, 37% in 1981 and 35% in 1986. Married women’s participation rate was 43% in 1976, 38% in 1981 and 35% in 1986. Moreover, 45% of women were working part-time in 1986, as opposed to 24% in 1976. Men’s participation rates have also declined, indicating again the severity of local job loss: for men aged between 20 and 65, the decline was from 97% in 1971 to 84% in 1986. Figures calculated from published and unpublished data from the CBS and ABS for Elizabeth LGA and the relevant collection districts in Munno Para LGA.

My reconstruction of a women's Elizabeth is necessarily partial and suggestive, and it will ultimately stand or fall on how those women read and imagine their lives. But Elizabeth's women, then and now, bring their own challenges to our understanding of gender disadvantage and inequality. What they say, and what they remember, is important for any project demanding social justice and a fair go. In particular, the women I know, and the women whose words I have read, stress the links between gender and class: that in Elizabeth, women and men are oppressed together because of who they are, while women's fortunes are narrowed further by the burdens of gender. Theirs is a feminism which is also about class and location, and which they express as pride and defiance and the possession of a valuable place. Elizabeth is something they worked hard to provide for others, especially their daughters and their sons. As mothers, wives, neighbours, unionists, activists, women strove and still strive to make this a safe and decent place. And it is a place, ultimately, they defended and still defend as something valuable and as something that deserves respect, not least from those who claim to be 'saving' Australia but know nothing of what is being lost.

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